

Interview with George Puglisi, '35, 14 April 1986.

Allen: We're talking with George Puglisi, a member of the class of 1935.

Geo: That's right, 1935

Allen: Now you were telling me that you got out of high school when?

Geo: I got out of high school in '32 and there was not much money, it was the beginning of the depression, elections had taken place and they thought I could work, so I went to work in Canfield, the rubber factory with my Dad.

Allen: Canfield?

Geo: H.O. Canfield on I think on Water Street. Once I was on Main Street. In those days the theatres were there, the Palace, and I worked for a full year and decided to come here and it was during that time that the banks failed. And the few dollars that I had saved, however, it was a savings bank and within two or three years, they did give us the money back. 50% now, 20% later and I decided, but I continued working at Meigs so while I was going to Jr. College the first year, I was working evenings. I forget from four to twelve or three to eleven or whatever it was. In those days they were making twenty five to thirty five cents an hour.

Allen: Well, I can remember those days, too, George.

Geo: Twenty five and thirty five cents an hour.

Allen: But that's about what I was making part time too.

Geo: But tuition, at that time, I forget what it was, a couple of hundred dollars .

Allen: \$375. for the year.

George: You see, so my second year I had no money. I had used it all up and that's when I went to Cortright and they gave me a scholarship so that I was fairly lucky. I was living at home, the folks were giving me food and I got the scholarship and

Allen: What type of a scholarship was it, do you know or recall?

George: Just tuition, they gave me tuition for the full year in

1934 - 35 and I think it was Cortright who gave that.

Allen: The Board had established some scholarships.

George: I can recall, you know an Italian family can be very proud like other people. I know professor Zampierre went down to this Italian Organization on the East Side that my dad belonged to and

Allen: SubAlpino?

George: You know we're helping some people, can you give us some money? And it came up at a meeting and of course, they all looked at my dad and he said, "MY son needs no help from anybody". And that was it. I needed help but nevertheless he wasn't going to admit to his peers that his son needed help. As I look back at it now, I suppose we all have our moments of pride and all that. And then, I enjoyed it here, you know,

Allen: All right, let's do a quick biographical aspect. After graduating from the Jr. College?

George: The week before, I lived on the East Side. I never took a bus. I walked from the East Side all the way to the Fairfield Avenue campus, a couple of miles, I imagine. I thought nothing of it then, I wouldn't want to do it now.

Allen: After graduation, what did you do?

George: After graduation from the Jr. College, I was admitted to Columbia. I went to New College for one year which was under the auspices of, it was a new idea there under the teacher's college. I didn't quite take to it and I transferred over to Columbia College so I got my Bachelor's at Columbia College but I put in one year at New College as it was called then, part of the teacher's college for undergraduates. And there I got a lot of help. Don't forget this is depression years now. Many of my friends were either working or looking for work and coming home during the summer I sold Fuller Brushes. There's another fellow who went to New College with me. He and I sold brooms and what not during those periods.

Allen: I sold Stanley brushes.

George: So that was in 1934-35-36 and then I graduated from Columbia in '37. I did my work in languages with a minor in English and History.

Allen: And after that?

George: And after that, I got out in '37 and, Bill, looking for work was, there was no work. I got a job selling insurance. I

didn't like it, I stayed two, three months and it was not for me. I would rather give them the money, than take their money and I sold Kopper's Coke and the best thing I did there was I became champion of the Ping Pong. In the morning, the salesmen used to meet and after that I got a job selling telephone directories around the country. And I traveled with this fellow. He met me in Bridgeport, we were having a heck of a time trying to sell his telephone directories and he hired me and I had good luck because a lot of fellows I knew were in the offices in Bridgeport (?) And we went down to Lexington, Ky. and somewhere in Tennessee and we stopped there. I couldn't sell a book. I would hit all the offices of the lawyers, doctors and what not. Finally I ran into someone that I had known at Columbia who was doing some work there and I asked him, "What the dickens gives here?". He said, "George, as soon as you open your mouth, we know you're from New England." I says, I come from Europe, not from New England. I wasn't born in the United States, I was born in Europe so that I came here as a child, so I came home and shortly after that, that I went to another business with a fellow who graduated from Cornell. He was looking for work and so was I. We went into the pizza business. He was a baker before that and I was pretty good with my tongue so that I was the outside sales and he did the work. And we made the pizzas of the type that you see in the stores now but we never got to the point of thinking about freezing them.

Allen: No one else did

George: It was not in, we sold pizzas three quarters baked and I also sold ovens but most of the sales were to taverns. Then I had a big accident. I had my car full of pizzas and I was in an accident on Pembroke Street. I didn't want to tell the police. We took the damage, the cost you know and we pulled out and at that time this fellow (?) He said, "let's get a new plan." He said we were going to get rich on pizza, we never did. We gave it up. We had an oven, we had everything and he said, "we'll take going out from Bridgeport." We had no luck getting a job in Bridgeport. I went East and he went West. He went to Fairfield and I went to Stratford. And it was in Stratford, the first place I ran into, evidently they were looking for someone, they asked me to be interviewed and I was interviewed and then they asked me to teach, there were about five or six of us applying for the job. And the role was supervisor and Mr. Rogers who was the Principal and Dr. Ireland was the superintendant sat in and they decided that I was the one they wanted. Whether it was because I was a fellow, oh, there was another fellow, there were three girls and two fellows applying for the job. One happened to be the daughter of a well known Stratfordite. I got the job, I got a contract. About a week, I was supposed to be in the end of January. I got a call from the Supt. Ireland, who said, "please bring the contract back." He says, the Board won't hire you, they found out that you were born in Italy. I asked him

what that had to do with it, what about my grades, what about my, I ended up with an A average at Columbia. Well, he says, "The Board members want to give it to a local." I didn't know what to do. I called Dr. Cortright and his answer was, "don't give up the contract." He says, "You have a contract, signed by the Chairman of the Board and the Supt." We finally worked out a deal, Bill. I went to them, they says, "when you give up the contract at the end of the year, if we hire you as a sub, from February to June, and then if you meet our standards, we'll hire you." I agreed to that and I stayed with them 40 years.

I did many things there. I taught the 7th and 8th grade English, Social Studies. I taught Civics, I taught U.S. History, then I was Director of Athletics for quite a while at the high school and then I got interested in this new stuff, they called it audio visual. And I took a few courses down at Columbia to get my Master's Degree, I got my Master's down there and I got interested in a Dr. Grunstedder, who was very hot on this and I thought it was a new way to teach History, using visuals, using movies, using film and I began building it up with the high school and in 1955, they decided to create a department and the department was called The Department of Audio Visual and I was the department head. A year later, they decided to open it townwide and so I became director and at that time of audio visual aids and I ended up as Director of Media and Library Services in Stratford. I spent 40 years there. I had a good association. I met wonderful people. I liked the kids. I see a lot of those kids, you know, around, and they call me Uncle George even though I'm a grandfather. But I haven't been in the classrooms since '55 and I hear some of my people complaining about the kids today, I don't know Bill. I meet them on the outside. I have grandchildren. If I judge my grandchildren, everything is fine but they tell me and what I read in the newspaper and what they tell me, they have problems galore.

Allen: Things have changed. Well let's go back now to the Jr. College. You were voted the most radical and the most ambitious

George: Yes, and I was the class poet. I suppose the most radical, yes, but John, oh the fellow in the book store. He and I used to get into arguments. At that time he asked me why, what was the matter with capitalism and I told him there were a lot of things wrong with capitalism. I suppose it fit. I was asked to write the class poem and I wrote a long poem. It's in our class book. I couldn't find the book the other day, I was looking for it.

Allen: That would be in the Scribe Commencement issue.

George: Yes.

Allen: I have it here.

George: We had our dances up in the hall there, the little hall where, near the building on the side there. There was a large hall where we used to have our dances and what not. I remember Dr. Zampierre. I found out later that he may have been under the pay of the facists government. I didn't know at that time.

Allen: He was a roommate of Mussolini when Mussolini was in Switzerland and he interviewed Hitler as well. Tell us a little bit more about Zampierre.

George: He went to a lot of Italian organizations. He was quite a speaker. he took a liking to me and I happened to like French. He was teaching French at the time. I had studied Italian in the meanwhile, because my folks when they came here felt that we were going to stay in the United States five, six, seven years and then manage to go back to Italy and live comfortably. It dind't materialize, they both died here. I studied Italian as a youngster because my folks knew that they were going back. When I got out, however, I never utilized what I was prepared for in teaching languages. I taught History. I got my masters in American History and I got my sixth year here at UB. They had a program, I think they were starting a sixth year program, I think it was in 1950 or 51.

Allen: How was Zamperre as a teacher?

George: I enjoyed him. French came easy, translation came easy. A lot of the fellows there would ask for help. I enjoyed him. As a teacher, I don't think he was an organized man looking at it afterwards. I would plan. Zampierre would come in and speak from the cuff and teach from the cuff. Some of the others that I liked there, would have taught English, I forget.

Allen: Helen Scurr?

George: I had her but there was another fellow.

Allen: Charles Goulding?

George: Goulding, yes, I had Goulding. I enjoyed him. English was my, even though I was born with another language, English became my strength, whether it was writing poetry, essay, whatever. I found that fairly easy. I enjoyed them. We had a science teacher, I forget his name. I meet him every so often.

Allen: Everett?

George: Everett, yes. I met him just a few years ago getting his license. Is he still living?

Allen: No, he died quite a few years ago.

George: I met him at the motor vehicle dept. maybe it was five, six or seven years ago, you know.

Allen: Even more than that, George.

George: Well, that was the last time I saw him, down at the motor vehicle dept.

Allen: Did you have Dr. Ropp?

George: Oh yes, Dr. Ropp.

Allen: How was he as a teacher?

George: I think I had him in science. I don't recall too much.

Allen: Did you know Cortright?

George: Oh yes, he was the one who helped me getting a scholarship. I didn't realize at the time that he had been Supt. of Schools in Bridgeport. I found this out later. I was interested in the things that we were doing rather than knowing what Cortright was doing. I thought he was a good fellow. As an administrator and organizer. As I look back at it now. At that time the only thing I remember was that he was a help to me and when I was in trouble in 1939-40 when I got the job, he was a help to me. He did offer me a scholarship and it was a help to me. Now at Columbia, the NYA program was, of course, and I came under that program immediately. Because my of folks were working folks rather than money folks. I got that kind of help. I worked in Casa (?) library there (slept half the time) I did the work and I enjoyed it though. We had Italian plays and what now.

Here at the Jr. College unfortunately, I was working nights and I had to work Saturdays and Sundays so that I didn't participate, not that there was much, now that I went to Columbia I was there so even here I had to work.

Allen: You didn't partake in any of the extra activities.

George: I refused to join any of the frat houses cause I was against them. I thought they were only for the rich and the idle. I look at them differently now, but at that time I can tell you how I felt. There wasn't much radicalism in the mid 30's. The most at Columbia was when we invaded the girl's school at Columbia, what is it?

Allen: Barnard?

George: Barnard, we broke the fences. But you know one of the

people that I remember speaking at that time was Marcos. Now he's in the news. He was at Columbia at the time. And, well he was studying. He's about my age, maybe a little younger than I am, but he was at Columbia at the time. I think he must have been a student. But they asked him to speak at one of the lectures and I recall attending one of the lectures only because he came from the Phillipines. Maybe he was on the way up already, I don't know, but I do recall being there in 1935-36-37.

Allen: Tell us a little bit about student life at the Jr. College. What did you do for fun and excitement?

George: Very little, very little. I lived home, it's like going to Sacred Heart today. You live home. Most of the fun we had was riding with the fellows that we knew. Several have died. Tony Spitrino, I can't think of the other fellow, we were good friends, but he passed away, John and several others, and in that class, I think there were about 25 or 30 who graduated. Then there was the freshman class that was a little larger. There weren't too many of us, you know. I suppose the Jr. College was looked down upon at that time but I had no problem getting into Columbia, so that while many were complaining that they couldn't transfer, I had no difficulty in transferring. I don't recall too much and perhaps I didn't participate. I would rather get into an argument with some of the fellows. I would rather write poetry. You know, each one has his own, and then, in the city I was connected with the organizations. I was directing plays for these Italian organizations in the city, in Italian, so I was involved with that and a lot of my friends were there. A lot of my friends did come to school so that the friends that I knew I hadn't left them, they were in the city yet and I went out with them. They didn't come to the Jr. College. I can tell you this, I was looked upon as a blood sucker on my parents by their friends because you don't send your son to school when there is need of money, you put them to work. I worked but it was different. I earned no money for my folks but I had a mother who felt that it was important for me and my brother. He was in UConn. when the war was on and had to join, all of them had to join at that time, and he was killed in the war, but she felt that education was important. I enjoyed it and my brother did too, perhaps because we liked school and we liked education, but a lot of my friends, I know, would have liked an education but their folks-. Couldn't criticize my mother very much because she would have told them to mind their own business and she worked. At the end of the depression, both my father and mother were working.

Allen: You were lucky to have two parents working.

George: Exactly, my father and mother both worked at the same place so that they felt that, the two of us going to school, my brother, we went him to Columbia for a year and we took him out

because he did nothing but fool around and we sent him to UConn. So that basically, I've enjoyed living, I always look for tomorrow, Bill, not yesterday. I intend to forget some of the things that happend yesterday and I look forward to things for tomorrow.

Allen: Right.

George: I'm very involved now at the Univ. of Bridgeport, their scholarship program. The HISP program. I think it is a very wonderful thing and I'm involved with a lot of Italian organizations.

Allen: How did you get involved with the HISP program?

George: Dr. Halsey at that time organized the Italian Committee, asked me to be on that committee, and that was when Joya Riccio was there, right from the beginning. I thought it was a program that I could back up and support. So that I've been with them right along. I've been executive secretary for about seven or eight years. I was president and we have scholarships. We have established a connection with the Univ. of Sienna through one of the scholars. I'll be there in July at the university in Sienna and I agree with Jim Halsey, what he was trying to do. I thought it was good, this inter-relationship on a human basis, on a person to person basis. And we have a good committee. Italian Committee is one of the committees, but there are many good committees. The India Committee is very good, the German committee is very strong, but the Italian Committee is the one I'm interested in. We had a meeting yesterday here over at the reading room in the John Cox Building. We had a musical program and members came.

Allen: Has your connection with the university been anything other than the HISP program?

George: Well I took my degree here you know. My sixth year and then they had a program when George Ingham was on it, the audio visual and some of the programs that were federally funded programs. Outside of that just interested in the alumni assn. I'm helping, you know the 50 year people are called "the Golden Knights." and I'm a golden knight now as a result of graduating 50 years ago.

Allen: Thank you very much. end of tape.